

**PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIM BACKWARDNESS:
BENGAL AND THE NORTH-WESTERN PROVINCES &
OUDH (1871-1900)**

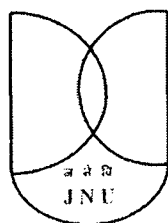
Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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DECLARATION

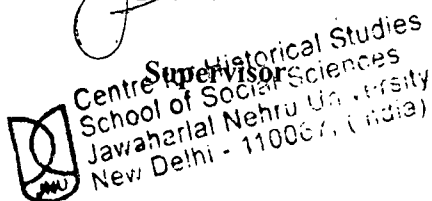
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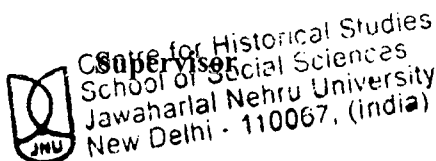
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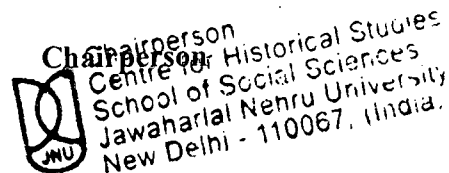
Prof. Janaki Nair



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TRANSLITERATION

In writing this dissertation, I have followed Jonh T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu Classical Hindi and English*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2006.

Besides, the translation of Urdu text into English in this work is mine, unless stated otherwise

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF MUSLIM BACKWARDNESS¹ IN BENGAL AND NORTH-WESTERN PROVINCES AND OUDH (1871-1900)

The Context of Study

India is a home of the third largest Muslim population after Indonesia and Pakistan, numbering 1,029 million, yet they are a minority group, constituting 13.5 per cent of the total population.² A section of them perceives itself as discriminated. A brief discussion of this was done by the government-appointed Sachar Committee Report (2006). The committee found, 'There was a sense of despair and suspicion as well [among Muslims].' The report further observed, 'In general, Muslims complained that they are constantly looked upon with a great degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures....Some attributed it to historical reasons and referred to it as the usual developmental lag.'³ In other words, Muslims feel themselves discriminated by the state and society.

As a Muslim intellectual, commenting on the findings of the Sachar Committee Report, lamented, 'Under-representation of Muslims in the educational and employment sectors in the country has been as consistent all along as, indeed, the official inaction in the matter...Having inherited from the British this legacy of social injustice to the Muslims and official inaction in the matter, independent India seems to have maintained it till this day.'⁴ To substantiate his argument, he invoked the name of W.W. Hunter, who

¹ The term backwardness of Muslims in the late nineteenth century was interchangeably used with fall, decay, decline, depression, impoverishment *idbar* (decline of good fortune), *nakbat* (adversity), *badhali* (badness of condition), *iflas* (poverty), *jahalat* (ignorance), *zillat* (humiliation) and *tanazzuli* (wane, falling off, degradation) etc.

² This is according to the 2001 Census. The majority Hindu community is 828 million, which is 80.5 per cent. Accessed on 3 June 2013, URL, http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/04-Distribution_by_Religion.pdf.

³ *Social, Economic and Education Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report*, Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, New Delhi, November 2006, pp. 9,10,11,23. For details, see the second chapter of the Report.

⁴ Syed Tahir Mahmood, 'From William Hunter to Rajinder Sachar Reports & Reports but no Results', *The Milli Gazette*, New Delhi, 19 November, 2006. Accessed 22 November 2012, URL: http://www.milligazette.com/dailyupdate/2006/200611195_condition_muslims_india.html.

was among the first British administrators and writers to argue that Muslims had become backward in Bengal after having been reduced to a “race ruined under British rule”.⁵

In short, such accounts are suggestive of deep-rooted perceptions among a section of Muslims that their backwardness is a result of historical and institutional discrimination started by the British government and followed by postcolonial Indian state as well. Contrary to this, Imtiaz Ahmad argued that there was no such deliberate discrimination practiced by the colonial state. Rather, he attributed the small size of the Muslim middle class--who were seriously inclined to education-- as the cause of Muslim backwardness in colonial and post-colonial India.⁶ But I express my dissent with Ahmad for overlooking colonialism as a factor. I shall later show how some of the colonial policies were detrimental to Indians, particularly Muslims at least in some regions, viz., Bengal. Even colonial administrators like W.W. Hunter conceded that some of the policies of British government led to the decline of Muslims in Bengal.

Hunter and Discourse on Muslim Backwardness (1871)

The genealogy of Muslim backwardness could be traced to Hunter, who published his *The Indian Musalmans* (1871). Needless to say, the work of Hunter had a huge impact on the public opinion and policy. It also worked as a catalyst to the rise of Muslim politics as the community leaders, armed themselves with Hunter’s documents, argued that the government should preferentially treat Muslims. The durability of the discourse can be gauged from the fact that even after the end of the British rule, Hunter continues to be widely-quoted and cited. His work sought ‘to inquire into the grievances of the Muhammadans under English rule; to point out their real wrongs, and the means of remedying them.’ The central thesis of Hunter was that Muslims were both a threat for the British rule and under its regime, they had also lagged behind. They were a threat

⁵ Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 2002, p. 3.

⁶ Imtiaz Ahmad, ‘Muslim Educational Backwardness: Competing Pressures of Secular and Religious Learning,’ in Christine Sleeter, Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, Arvind K. Mishra, Sanjay Kumar, eds., *School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives*, Oriental BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2012, p. 142. D.L. Sheth, too, denied the fact that the Muslims of India as a whole were victims of systematic and institutional discrimination by the Indian state. See, D L Sheth, ‘Minority Politics: the Shifting Terms of Policy Discourse’, *Seminar*, November 2009. Accessed 27 April 2013, URL: http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/602/602_d_l_sheth.htm.

because the radical Wahabi movements in Bengal were posing a serious challenge to the security and stability of British rule in the second half of the nineteenth century (for details, see chapter two). 'The Musalmans of India are, and have been for many years, a source of *chronic danger* to the British Power in India. For some reason or other they have hold [held] *aloof* from our system, and the changes in which the more flexible Hindus have cheerfully acquiesced, are regarded by them as deep personal wrongs.'⁷

As stated above, Hunter was perhaps the most important writer who formulated the idea of Muslim backwardness and triggered off debates around it, but before him there were many others who reflected on the decline of Muslims. Over a century before Hunter, Shah Wali-ullah (1703-1762), the great Islamic thinker, also saw his period as a melancholic one: 'In short, the Muslim community is in a pitiable condition. All control of the machinery of government is in the hands of Hindus, because they are the only people who are capable and industrious. Wealth and prosperity are concentrated in their hands, while *the share of Muslims is nothing but poverty and misery*.'⁸ The Urdu poets of the 18th century Delhi wailed the loss of Muslim power and ensuing political instability. Mirza Muhammad Rafi 'Sauda' (1713-1781) penned *Shahr-Ashob*, which was an exaggerated representation of the decline of Delhi.⁹ Another important poet of that period, Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), too, 'captured a phase of the melancholy and the pathetic in a decaying society.'¹⁰ Mir tried to grapple with the changing times,

اس عہد کو نہ جانئے اگلا سا عہد میر

وہ دور اب نہیں وہ زمین آسمان نہیں

⁷ Hunter 2002, p. 3. (Emphasis added)

⁸ Khalid Ahmad Nizami, ed., *Shah Waliullah Ke Siyasi Maktuba*, Aligarh, 1951, as cited in Khalid B. Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857-1948*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1968. (Emphasis added). Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi (1913-1999), a noted Islamic and Arabic scholar, saw the decline of Indian Muslims as a part of 'Muslim decadence' at global level, which began in late seventh century when the period of the four Caliphs (AD 632-61) came to an end. For details, see Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Islam and the World*, Academy of Islamic research & Publications, Lucknow, 1966.

⁹ Satish Chandra, *Social Change And Development In Medieval Indian History*, Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2008, pp. 68-69.

¹⁰ Ali Jawad Zaidi, *A History of Urdu Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1993, p. 99.